

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

No.12 - Feminist Theories

INTRODUCTION

"Feminism is not one theory but has many different perspectives within it" ¹, and "attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation" ². The different perspectives agree that women are treated unfairly, and there is a commitment to change.

Defining feminism and feminist theory is not straightforward as there are many different definitions, including:

- "Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society" ³;
- The goal of feminist theory is "to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it. Feminist theory reveals the importance of women's individual and shared experiences and our struggles. It analyses how sexual difference is constructed within any intellectual and social world and builds accounts of experiences from these differences" ⁴;
- Feminists are "those who see women as exploited, devalued and oppressed, who are committed to changing this, and who consequently adopt a critical perspective towards dominant intellectual traditions that have ignored or justified women's oppression" ⁵.

¹ Measor & Sikes.

² Tong, R (1989) *Feminist Thought A Comprehensive Introduction*, London: Routledge p1.

³ Weedon, C (1987) *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell p1.

⁴ Humm, M (1989) *A Dictionary of Feminist Thought*, London: Women's Press px.

⁵ Acker, J; Barry, K & Essenveld, J (1991) Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research. In Fonow, M.M & Cook, J.A (eds) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press pp150-151.

Feminist theories share, in varying degrees, the following concepts:

i) The need for major change in society.

"At the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change... in the social, economic and political order" ⁶.

ii) There is a challenge to science which ignores the link between knowledge and power.

Feminist research is "passionate inquiry" ⁷ committed to challenging power inequalities in research and in society, most particularly related to gender.

There is concern about "appropriation" where "researchers take subjects' stories and may share them without permission or with an audience to whom subjects have tenuous links" ⁸. Thus the researcher should be accountable and responsible for what they say.

As with all qualitative research, there is an emphasis on reflexivity by the researcher in feminist research, particularly as the researcher will usually be an academic (feminist).

iii) Anti-essentialist.

Essentialism is the belief that certain characteristics (eg: masculinity, femininity) are fixed, "real" aspects of the person. Anti-essentialism challenges this, in the sense of highlighting the socially constructed nature of these characteristics.

The differences within feminist theories are based on three areas ⁹:

a) The causes of women's oppression, and the role of patriarchy;

⁶ Delmar, R (1986) What is feminism. In Mitchell, J & Oakley, A (eds) What is Feminism, Oxford: Blackwell p8.

⁷ Raymond, J (1986) A Passion for Friends: Towards a Philosophy of Affection, London: Women's Press.

⁸ Maher, M (1999) Relationship-based change. In Kopala, M & Suzuki, L.A (eds) Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage p189.

⁹ Measor and Sikes.

- b) The programme for change;
- c) The ultimate goal for society.

Table 1 outlines the three main types of feminist theory - liberal, Marxist-Socialist, and radical.

LIBERAL FEMINISM	MARXIST-SOCIALIST FEMINISM	RADICAL FEMINISM
Cause of oppression		
unfair laws	capitalism	patriarchy
Programme for change		
change laws	overthrow capitalism	complete social change
Goal for society		
fair laws and equality of opportunity	fair economic system other than capitalism	society without "sexual class system"
Position of men		
also suffer because of inequality for women	also suffer because of capitalism	always benefit from patriarchy

Table 1 - Basic differences between three main types of feminist theory.

MAIN TYPES OF FEMINIST THEORY

LIBERAL FEMINISM

This is the most popular form of feminism. The origins of liberal feminism can be traced back to Mary Wollstonecroft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1792. Women had been protesting about their social position long before a formal feminist theory was developed ¹⁰.

Liberal feminists tend to focus upon changes in the law as the means to improve gender inequalities and provide equal rights, like the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 or child-care provisions for working mothers.

¹⁰ Knuttila & Kubik.

Liberal feminists "take for granted that the state is the proper and indeed the only legitimate authority for enforcing justice in general and women's rights in particular" ¹¹.

They also accept that men can be fellow victims of these inequalities in society.

Criticisms

1. Society is not necessarily changed for the better. "Instead of the sexy chick or the perfect homemaker we now have a new image to live up to: the liberated woman" ¹².

2. Not radical enough for some feminists because legal change does not necessarily change attitudes and behaviour, particularly of men.

MARXIST-SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Influenced by the ideas of Marx and Engels, gender inequality is seen as due to economic, social and political structures in society. The oppression of women is the same as class oppression.

Women's exploitation is not entirely due to men, but due to capitalism. Some men (eg: owners of the means of production) may benefit from capitalism, but most men are exploited by it too. Thus there is scope for exploited groups to work together.

For Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson ¹³, pre-industrial societies were communal and thus more equal. Though men and women may have done different tasks, there was not the gender inequality seen in capitalism. What came with capitalism was property ownership that changed the relationship between the sexes.

For example, with patrilocality, the wife went to live with their husband's family, and all her labours were now owned by the husband. The parallel with capitalism is that the worker does not own their labours, they are simply paid a wage for them.

Capitalism also benefits from women's efforts in terms of pregnancy, birth, and early childcare and socialisation, which are all unpaid; yet one day the

¹¹ Jaggar, A.M (1983) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

¹² Willis, E (1975) The conservatism of males. In Redstockings (ed) *Feminist Revolution*, New York: Random House.

¹³ Coontz, S & Henderson, P (1986) (eds) *Women's Work. Men's Property*, London: Verso.

child will be a future worker whose labour capitalism will gain from. This has been called the "social factory"¹⁴.

Women also act as a reservoir of labour, when needed, to keep wages down for the capitalists. Generally, when women take paid employment, they are less likely to join unions and to be militant, which are further benefits to the capitalists¹⁵.

The solution to women's oppression is to overthrow capitalism.

Criticisms

1. Marxism explains why workers are exploited, but not why men exploit women. Marxist feminism is like a traditional marriage where the husband (Marxism) has all the power¹⁶.

2. This approach has the weaknesses of Marxist and Socialist theory generally, including the idealism about the type of society (socialist or communist) that will replace capitalism.

RADICAL FEMINISM

Shula Firestone in "The Dialectics of Sex"¹⁷ saw sexual oppression as the fundamental form of oppression, and stratification based on the "sexual class system". Women are disadvantaged by their biology, and especially by childbirth. This tends to produce a dependence within the family on the man, who takes advantage of this situation to extend his power into all areas of society.

For Firestone: "The sexual class system is the model for all other exploitative systems and thus the tapeworm that must be eliminated first for any true revolution"¹⁸. One means of challenging the sexual class system is through birth control techniques.

Radical feminists do not disagree about women's oppression as key, but about the origins.

¹⁴ Dalla Costa, M & James, S (1973) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Communists*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

¹⁵ Benston, M (1972) *The political economy of women's liberation*. In Glazer-Malbin, N & Waehrer, H.Y (eds) *Women in a Man-Made World*, Chicago: Rand McNally.

¹⁶ Hartmann, H (1981) *The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Toward a more progressive union*. In Sargent, L (ed) *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, London: Pluto Press.

¹⁷ Firestone, S (1972) *The Dialectic of Sex*, London: Paladin.

¹⁸ Quoted in Haralambos & Holborn p595.

Sherry Ortner ¹⁹ felt that the origin of women's oppression came from the low value placed on nature (as compared to culture), and women are viewed as closer to nature than men because of their physiological functions (like childbirth).

While Michelle Rosaldo ²⁰ distinguished between the public and the domestic world, and women being associated with the latter, thus have lower status and power. The public world is the place in society associated with power, and it is dominated by men.

A key concept behind the oppression of women is patriarchy. Kate Millett in "Sexual Politics" ²¹ emphasised the role of patriarchy in all aspects of society. Very simply, it means "male shall dominate female", and it is there throughout the socialisation process.

A more extensive of definition of patriarchy is:

...(T)he manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources ²².

Patriarchy is a controversial concept, and is used in different ways by different authors ²³.

So overall: "Radical feminists believe that the structure of society prevents equality between men and women and only changes in the social structure can end them" ²⁴.

However, "separatist feminists" prefer for women to organise independently of men and, for them, lesbians are the true feminists. "For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist,

¹⁹ Ortner, S.B (1974) Is female to male as nature is to culture? In Rosaldo, M.Z & Lamphere, L (eds) Women, Culture and Society, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

²⁰ Rosaldo, M.Z (1974) Women, culture and society: A theoretical overview. In *ibid*.

²¹ Millett, K (1970) Sexual Politics, New York: Doubleday.

²² Lerner (1986) quoted in Wooley, O.W (1994) And man created "woman". In Fallon, P; Katzman, M.A & Wooley, S.C (eds) Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders, New York: Guilford Press.

²³ See eg: Walby, S (1990) Theorising Patriarchy, Oxford: Blackwell.

²⁴ Haralambos & Holborn p260.

homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance... No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism" ²⁵.

Criticisms

1. Failure to explain aspects of patriarchy from society to society, and from individual to individual ²⁶. This has been called "a false universalism which cannot understand historical change or take sufficient account of divisions between women based on ethnicity and class" ²⁷.

2. Failure to link women's oppression to specific social structures, like capitalism ²⁸.

OTHER FEMINIST THEORIES

1. Black Feminism

The main types of feminism have been criticised for ignoring ethnic differences between women, and this led to the development of Black feminism. White women, usually middle-class, who traditionally dominate feminism, cannot understand the different experiences of Black women, particularly African-Americans in the US, because of the legacy of slavery ²⁹.

Black feminism is able to show the role of race, class and gender in the disadvantaging of women: "race x class x gender" rather than "race + class + gender" ³⁰.

2. Psychoanalytic Feminism

Influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts, this approach sees the oppression of women as based on taboos about female sexuality. Change will occur because of an "interior" (psychological)

²⁵ Clarke, C (1981) Lesbianism as an act of resistance. In Moraga, C & Anzaldwa, G (eds) This Bridge Called My Back, New York: Kitchen Table.

²⁶ Rowbotham, S (1982) The trouble with patriarchy. In Evans, M (ed) The Woman Question, London: Fontana.

²⁷ Walby (1990) quoted in Haralambos & Holborn p609.

²⁸ McDonough, R & Harrison, R (1978) Patriarchy relations of production. In Kuhn, A & Wolpe, A.M (eds) Feminism and Materialism, London: Routledge.

²⁹ Collins, P.H (1990) Black Feminist Thought, London: Unwin Hyman.

³⁰ Brewer, R.M (1993) Theorizing race, class and gender: The new scholarship of Black feminist intellectuals and Black women's labour. In James, S.M & Busia, A.P.A (eds) Theorizing Black Feminisms, London: Routledge.

revolution ³¹.

Freud's concept of the Oedipal experience in early childhood is key. The upshot is that boys learn to be active and girls to be passive ³². These ideas were developed by Nancy Chodorow ³³.

3. Post-Structuralist/Post-Modern Feminist

This approach "sees sex/gender as discursive practices which constitute specific subjectivities through power and resistance" ³⁴. In other words, the focus is upon language as constructing the world.

4. Third World/Post-colonial Theories

The fact that most feminists are from the Developed countries can make them part of the oppressors of women in the Third World ³⁵.

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³¹ Mitchell, J (1974) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

³² Mitchell, J (1971) *Women's Estate*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

³³ Chodorow, N (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

³⁴ Lawthom p75.

³⁵ Lorde, A (1983) The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In Moraga, C & Anzaldwa, G (eds) *This Bridge Called My Back*, New York: Kitchen Table.

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